

Interactive Propaganda and Jingoism Through Militaristic Video Games Post-9/11 Terrorist Attacks

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of the US government in reviving the spirit of patriotism and jingoism through militaristic video games after the September 11 attacks that killed around 3,000 people. This study, in particular, investigates the collaboration between the US government and an American video game developer to create a militaristic video game following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Militaristic video games, on the other hand, can trigger extreme levels of patriotism and nationalism, leading to a sense of patriotic frenzy that can aid in treating traumatised Americans while at the same time shaping their perceptions of America's invasion of the Middle East. However, militaristic video games, which contain political and ideological messages, have transformed into new forms of propaganda, also known as interactive propaganda. Therefore, this study revealed that video games are becoming a new medium, aside from movies or news reports, that can be a second medium for the US government to propagate its political messages. In addition, the narrative and visuals of video games that contain propaganda can shape new perspectives for their players to interpret the connection between the September 11 attacks and terrorism.

Keywords: American video games developer, interactive propaganda, Jingoism, militaristic video games, patriotic frenzy, September 11 attacks, US government

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INTRODUCTION

Militaristic video games commonly draw inspiration from real-life events, using actual wars, international conflicts, or invasions as a base for their storylines. However, this adaptation of real-world events has sparked controversy in society. Several factors contribute to these issues, including their potential to stir public

polemics, reinforce false stigmas and stereotypes, or inaccurately represent national identities. Additionally, such games are sometimes criticised as propaganda tools that discredit specific groups or individuals. Consequently, these video games occasionally ignite debates that influence both players and society (Deskins, 2013; Robinson, 2012; Saleem, 2008; Šisler, 2008).

The 1990s marked a growth of militaristic video games, but after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the involvement of the US military in the video game industry significantly intensified. This shift was driven by various factors, including the demands of modern warfare, technological advancement, literacy advancement, and economic development, prompting military intervention in this sector. At the same time, the Pentagon's new vision and mission, focused on counterinsurgency, were reflected in the military's adoption and use of video games as a tool after the 9/11 attacks. This evolution shows how militaristic video games have grown in complexity, replicating real-world scenarios faced by US forces while embedding political and ideological messages tied to actual events (Mead, 2013).

The representation of actual events in militaristic video games is an interesting topic for further discussion. The creation of such games reflects a sense of admiration for the country involved in a military conflict, yet this admiration can sometimes evolve into propaganda and lead to a spirit of jingoism. At its core, these expressions

are easily accessible to the public through various media such as posters, books, and movies. Nevertheless, what role do video games play in promoting propaganda and jingoism? This question underscores the importance of examining the influence of video games in shaping perceptions of nationalism and militarism, making them a crucial topic in discussions around propaganda and jingoism.

There has been limited research on the role of interactive propaganda and jingoism in militaristic video games, specifically in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Previous studies have primarily focused on the collaboration between the US military and the video game industry (Robinson, 2012) or the impact of such games on reinforcing Muslim stereotypes (Šisler, 2008). However, these studies overlook the content of militaristic video games themselves, which contain significant elements of propaganda and hidden political messages. Consequently, it is essential to address the mislabelling of militaristic video games, especially those produced in the aftermath of 9/11.

Additionally, there is a significant gap in research regarding the relationship between militaristic video games and Bush's policies during the war on terror agenda. American public opinion on the US invasion of Iraq was strongly shaped by the 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT) Military Campaign, which was effectively packaged in jingoistic, militaristic video games. Therefore, this study explores how the US administration utilised interactive

propaganda and nationalistic rhetoric to shape Americans' perceptions of the Iraq invasion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Jingoism and Video Games

Nationalism and patriotism are frequently derived from socio-economic conditions that encourage people to unite their country. However, when nationalism and patriotism become overly intense, they can give rise to a situation known as “patriotic frenzy” (Cunningham, 1971, p. 429). This occurs due to a lack of information, making individuals' patriotism susceptible to radicalism and a narrow, restricted understanding. This extreme form of patriotism is referred to jingoism, which can be characterised by several key features, as follows: 1) Jingoism represents an excessively aggressive form of patriotism that leads to hostile or oppressive foreign policies; 2) The term emerged in the 1870s when Britain faced the challenge of responding to Russian aggression against Turkey; 3) Its origin can be traced to the phrase “*by Jingo*,” which was first popularised in 1878 as a music hall song advocating for military action against Russia; 4) The term has become part of the language and it is still used to criticise aggressive foreign policy act (McNamara, 2019).

Although the terminology of ‘jingoism’ has been in use since the 19th century, it remains relevant today to describe the extreme expressions of patriotism found in public policy or even in entertainment

media, including video games. In the video game industry, jingoism is portrayed as an exaggerated form of nationalism, surfacing in specific contexts. After the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks, video game developers seized the opportunity to create militaristic games inspired by real-world conflicts, reflecting the heightened patriotic sentiments of the time. A common theme across these war-themed games is the portrayal of America as the global hero, taking on and neutralising threats associated with the so-called “axis of evil” (Gagnon, 2010; Hammond & Pötzsch, 2020; Payne, 2016; Robinson, 2016; Šisler, 2014).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, we employ Marlin’s (2002) concept of propaganda techniques as an analytical framework to examine the political messages and ideologies conveyed through militaristic video games. Essentially, propaganda relies on specific techniques in its dissemination process. In general, seven techniques are commonly used by propagandists, including: 1) Name-Calling; 2) Glittering Generality; 3) Transfer; 4) Testimonial; 5) Plain Folk; 6) Card-Stacking; 7) Bandwagon (Marlin, 2002, pp. 102-106). The term propaganda itself began to be commonly used in many countries at the end of 1914, when World War I began. Propaganda can be defined as a deliberate effort, executed through communication, to shape beliefs, influence actions, or instil attitudes in an audience while suppressing or bypassing informed, logical, and reflective individual judgment.

In alignment with Marlin's perspective, Jowett and O'Donnell (2006) describe propaganda as a type of communication designed to provoke responses that align with the goals of the propagandist (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006, pp. 2).

The construction of such perspectives serves a clear purpose. Douglas Kellner (1995) argues that such spectacles reveal the dynamics of power and powerlessness, illustrating who wields authority and the capacity for violence. These depictions dramatise and legitimise the *status quo*, sending a clear message to the powerless: failure to conform can result in imprisonment or death. Unsurprisingly, these portrayals of power and oppression are targeted at young audiences. Through movies, television, social media, music, and video games, the media aims to influence their still-developing political views, making them more susceptible to ideological shaping (Kellner, 1995, pp. 2).

The political and cultural narratives that emerged in the 9/11 attacks cannot be separated from the broader discourse of neo-Orientalism. Building on the tradition of earlier Orientalism, neo-Orientalism refers to contemporary forms of representation that construct the Arab and Muslim world through a binary opposition between the West—perceived as civilised and democratic—and the East—perceived as irrational, violent, or backward. Neo-Orientalism itself differs from classical Orientalism in that it places greater emphasis on the Arab and Islamic worlds as the primary focus of cultural and political attention following the 9/11 attacks.

Rather than portraying the East merely as something exotic and backward, neo-Orientalist discourse increasingly frames Arab societies and Muslim identities as sources of violence, insecurity, and extremism, thereby reinforcing the binary opposition between superior Western values and inferior Arab culture (Altwaiji, 2023, pp. 6-9). The post-9/11 discourse of neo-Orientalism has become increasingly prominent in American politics, media, and cultural production, reinforcing an “us versus them” framework that positions Arab and Muslim identities as potential threats to Western values and security (Altwaiji, 2014, p. 313). Such representations contribute to the reproduction of stereotypes and simplified understandings of complex political realities, particularly in narratives related to the War on Terror.

Several scholars further argue that post-9/11 cultural products often serve as vehicles for neo-Orientalist, neo-imperialist, and fundamentalist narratives. Islam and Muslim identities are frequently framed through binary oppositions such as good versus evil, freedom versus terror, and civilisation versus barbarism (Altwaiji, 2021, pp. 1-9). In such narratives, terrorism, religious extremism, and cultural differences are often framed through representations that portray Muslim societies as inherently problematic entities, while simultaneously legitimising Western political, military, or cultural intervention. Neo-Orientalist discourse generally links Islamism and terrorism to a broader perception of threat, resulting in recurring representations of Muslims as the

cultural “Other” in contemporary American narratives (Altwaiji, 2014, 2020). As cultural products, militaristic video games may also participate in the reproduction of these narratives through their stories, characters, visual representations, and gameplay mechanics.

With the rapid advancement of technology, propaganda media has extended beyond the movie industry into the realm of video games. As previously mentioned, video games have evolved into a powerful medium for shaping perspectives, specifically among their primary audience of young people. Much like Hollywood filmmakers, video game developers leverage their creativity and expertise to craft games that address contemporary global issues. By combining player interactivity with carefully constructed propaganda narratives, video games have evolved into a new medium of influence often described as “interactive propaganda” (Halter, 2006).

Propagandists manipulate conventional propaganda media according to planners' instructions or directives, which are subsequently disseminated to the public repeatedly and constantly (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006). In general, the messages and ideologies that propagandists aim to express to a larger society can only be identified through visual means (posters or movies), and it can be argued that the hidden messages only reached the surface of society itself. In other words, the connection between propaganda media and society still has some distance between them. People who consume propaganda media will be

provided two different choices: accept it or reject it.

In contrast, video games are inherently interactive. Propaganda, however, goes beyond simply presenting information from a particular perspective. It's not enough for individuals to merely accept or reject interactive propaganda when it is presented to them. By engaging with it, players inevitably become participants in the propaganda itself. When video game developers successfully persuade players to adopt the ideologies embedded in their games, they have effectively assumed the role of propagandists. But what about players who reject the propaganda? While they may reject it, they can still enjoy the full gameplay experience. This highlights that even if players resist the propaganda, they can still find the game's content engaging, as it is deeply intertwined with the interactive and immersive nature of the video games. Thus, technological advances in game development can serve as a powerful tool for interactive propaganda. As Jowett and O'Donnell argue, new technology is a potent ally for propagandists (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006).

Militaristic video games are considered a form of digital violence, especially when such games mislead the public or shape perceptions in a biased manner. According to Godfrey (2022), militaristic video games represent a fusion of violence and militarism, designed to be marketed and consumed by the public. Dholakia and Reyes (2018) argue that all forms of mediated violence, whether in movies, video games, or news reporting,

serve as a foundation for social, economic, and political legitimisation of real-world violence.

In the video game industry, numerous platforms, such as Steam, provide avenues for developers to release and distribute their games. As the largest digital distribution platform for PC games, Steam boasted 120 million monthly active users in 2020. By January 2023, the platform reported a record 33 million concurrent players, an increase from 30 million the previous year. This growth solidifies Steam's position as one of the leading platforms for digital game purchases worldwide (Statista, 2024).

In addition to serving as a platform where global video game developers can showcase their video games, Steam offers discussion forums that allow players to engage in conversations about games or seek solutions to technical issues they encounter. While Steam is undoubtedly a profitable and influential platform for both developers and players, it is not without its challenges, specifically concerning digital violence among its user base. Notably, Steam faced scrutiny following the 2016 Munich terrorist attack, as the perpetrator was a Steam active user who used the platform to glorify mass shootings and propagate anti-Muslim narratives (Diehl, 2019).

The hate speech incident on the Steam forum is just one of many instances targeting specific communities. According to the Radicalisation Awareness Network (2021), extremists and terrorists, at the forefront of digital innovation, are leveraging video games and related

platforms to exploit new opportunities. Their swift adaptation demonstrates a level of technological ingenuity that surpasses previous expectations, enabling them to gain a significant digital advantage. Lakomy (2019) had already highlighted concerns about video games and adjacent platforms serving as mediums for digital propaganda (Lakomy, 2019, pp. 384-385), radicalisation, and even recruitment (Schlegel, 2021; Europol, 2021). As a result, the intersection of radicalisation, propaganda, and video games represents a deeply complex form of digital violence, one that poses significant challenges due to its widespread reach and effectiveness—particularly in targeting young audiences within gaming communities.

Schott (2016) notes that video games featuring digital violence have sparked debate among politicians, social scientists, and journalists, who argue that these games can produce “a deformed outlook on life”, making them a controversial form of media violence (Schott, 2016, p. 1). Imran et al. (2022) argue that violent video games encourage players to harm others, addressing negative themes like the use of offensive language, disrespect for authority, and commit violence acts, including killing people and animals. Greitemeyer (2019) adds that the combination of interactivity and violence in video games makes them more harmful than other media.

Therefore, militaristic video games have become a powerful tool for shaping public opinions, combining entertainment with subtle propaganda. They are able to

glorify military power and justify violence, embedding patriotic or ideological values in the player's experience. Rather than just a gameplay mechanic, digital violence normalises war, presenting it as a heroic solution to global problems. While these games can encourage national pride, they also raise concerns about desensitising players to violence and reinforcing harmful cultural stereotypes tied to specific political agendas.

METHODS

This study employs qualitative research methods combined with a literature review approach. The primary focus is on militaristic video games released in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, which have emerged as a novel form of propaganda. Data collection was carried out through the following steps: 1) Primary data were gathered from digital archives of three video games and documentaries relevant to militaristic video games; 2) Secondary data were collected from scientific articles, books, and online publications that were relevant to the research topic; 3) All analysed data will be included in the findings and discussion. Additionally, the data will be examined using Randal Marlin's framework of propaganda techniques to identify the types of propaganda employed in militaristic video games.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

September 11 Attacks

According to the Global Terrorism Database and various other studies, on September 11, 2001,

19 militants affiliated with the Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda hijacked four aeroplanes and launched coordinated attacks across three different states. Two of the planes were deliberately flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City, eventually causing the collapse of both towers. A third plane struck the Pentagon near Washington, D.C., while the fourth, likely targeting either the US Capitol or the White House, crashed into an empty field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after passengers attempted to overpower the hijackers. Nearly 3,000 people died in the attacks (Arias, 2003; Blinken, 2023; Kean, 2004; START, 2015), triggering a major US initiative to counter terrorism and setting the direction for Bush's presidency for the next few years.

Following the attacks, Americans grappled with widespread post-traumatic stress disorder, accompanied by pervasive fear and anxiety over the possibility of future terrorist attacks. Friedman (2004) describes American society after the attacks as being in a phase of emotional riptides, a state of shock, rage, helplessness, and vulnerability, a moral crisis, and deep uncertainty. However, a few months later, the US government began to instil patriotism in the American public to heal their inner wounds and reduce their fears. It started with the establishment of the idea of the war on terrorism, which was initiated by George W. Bush in his speech during the Joint Session of Congress and the American People on September 20, 2001.

In January 2002, four months after the attacks, Bush delivered his State of the Union address, reaffirming the United States' commitment to the GWOT.

The policy changes, military campaigns, and terrorist attacks carried out by the US government have significantly contributed to the complexity of these issues. In this context, it is the government's responsibility to effectively communicate information and narratives that help dismantle terrorist organisations. These complexities played a key role in shaping public opinion, as support for the US invasion of Iraq largely depended on the widely held belief among Americans that there was a connection between the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq.

Militarism and Video Games

The development of the video game industry is considered a significant form of popular culture that consistently intersects with other domains, including militarism. Some military experts argue that the link between militarism and video games began to emerge in the late 1980s, when World War II-themed video games gained popularity. However, a closer examination reveals that this connection actually traces back to the 1950s. The US military's involvement with video games was inadvertently established when physicist William Higinbotham, working at the Brookhaven National Laboratory under the US Department of Defence (DoD), created a simple physics-based game called *Tennis for Two* in 1958. Higinbotham developed the game as a way to attract

visitors to visit the laboratory, marking the beginning of an unexpected collaboration between the military and the gaming world (Beekman, 2014).

The video game industry's direct ties to the military are referred to as the Military-Entertainment Complex (Robinson, 2012, pp. 4-5). These video games play a significant role in normalising and legitimising support for the militarisation of both social and political life, ultimately shaping a society that becomes increasingly familiar with global warfare. The symbiotic collaboration between the military and the video game sector has evolved since the early 1980s, with the military initially providing technologies that were already available to the gaming industry. By the mid-1990s, this collaboration shifted, with the military actively directing commercial game developers to create simulations of military equipment—such as tanks, helicopters, and other combat vehicles—for military training and strategic purposes.

The rapid development of militaristic video games accelerated after the 1991 Gulf War, as advances in technology enabled increasingly realistic combat simulations. Recognising their value for military training, the US Army adopted sophisticated video game-based simulations to enhance personnel preparation (Power, 2007). This growing integration of military and entertainment technologies was further reflected in the establishment of 'Simulation Training and Instrumentation Command' (STRICOM), —later renamed 'Program Executive

Office for Simulation, Training, and Instrumentation' (PEOSTRI),—which managed substantial investments in simulation and training technologies, with an annual budget exceeding \$3.5 billion for computer simulation by 2008 (Robinson, 2012).

The merger of the military and the video game industry carry significant political implications. The militarised content within video games is increasingly shaped by real-world events, specifically following the shift toward a conflict-driven US foreign policy (Robinson, 2012). After Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the American video game industry saw a rise in militaristic titles, such as *Super Battletank* (1992) and *Desert Strike* (1992), which were heavily inspired by the Gulf War. This trend resurfaced after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. The geopolitical events led to a significant increase in the popularity and sales of military-themed video games, both in the US and internationally (Mead, 2013; Ouellette & Thompson, 2017; Robinson, 2012; Šisler, 2014). Militaristic video games, which focus on shooting and destruction, reinforce the idea that conflicts can only be resolved through military force rather than diplomatic means.

Since 2003, the Pentagon has shown a keen interest in collaborating with video game developers. According to NBC News reporter Matt Slagle (2003), this collaboration extended to the CIA as well, with the development of software designed

to train both spies and US troops (Slagle, 2003). In analysing the post-9/11 rise of militaristic video game development, Roger Stahl referred to these games as “insurgent hunting games,” in which players are cast as part of a covert national security team tasked with neutralising terrorist threats (Stahl, 2006, p. 118). These games invoke the rhetoric of the GWOT and frequently depict the enemy as a rogue state, a portrayal that Robinson argues transcends the limits of reason and diplomacy (Robinson, 2012, p. 8).

These themes play a crucial role in framing the US Army's stance during the GWOT, in which it aimed to function as a slow-moving global police force. In this context, both the content and gameplay offer players the freedom to engage in combat and position themselves as representatives of the United States. Militaristic video games can reinforce national values and patriotism through covert military operations, much like the Bush administration's justification for the invasion. Within this framework, players of such games are described by Stahl as “virtual citizen-soldiers”—a hybrid identity shaped by the intersection of digital media, social institutions, and real-world events (Stahl, 2006, p. 125).

9/11 Terrorist Attacks and American Video Games Industry

The 9/11 attacks were a turning point in history, quickly becoming a tragedy that fueled the war on terror campaign. David Holloway argues that the war on terror represents not only a response to a

specific event but also a rhetorical construct and a series of narratives that shaped the 9/11 tragedy and the United States' global position (Holloway, 2008). Andrew Bacevich (2002) contends that the war on terror is not merely a form of resistance imposed on the United States, but rather a lethal expression of its own intentions and actions. The US government's portrayal of the GWOT often obscures the underlying political causes of conflict in the Middle East, diverting public attention from the fact that the US is contributing to the region's resistance movements. In the aftermath of 9/11, Bush's speeches became a central tool for shaping public opinion. These speeches, while primarily focused on terrorism, also served to justify the American invasion of Iraq. Research by Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner reveals that over 70% of US citizens supported the invasion of Iraq, starting on March 19, 2003 (Gershkoff & Kushner, 2005).

Public interest in war-related issues often leads to increased consumption of news coverage, making the media an important channel through which governments communicate information about military conflicts (Gershkoff & Kushner, 2005). Through reporting practices, visual framing, and the dissemination of political messages, the media can significantly influence public opinion. This persuasive function also extends to entertainment media, particularly video games, which possess a high degree of interactivity. By employing visual design, narrative construction, and embedded propaganda elements, video games can

act as indirect channels for disseminating political messages and shaping public perceptions of war and conflict.

Video game developers have become increasingly bold in addressing the war on terrorism, a theme heavily promoted by Bush in his speeches as part of the aggressive GWOT. This trend has intensified, specifically as the situation in America began stabilising. This shift suggests that the once-popular trend of the fantasy genre in video games is becoming less relevant, while the rise of new ideologies centred around resistance to terrorism is rapidly gaining traction. According to Halter (2006), Eddo Stern, an artist in the video game industry, observed that since the 9/11 attacks, the American public has become more familiar with the term "terrorist," largely due to extensive media coverage of Middle Eastern terrorism. Developers have seized this opportunity to craft militaristic video games set in the Middle East, aiming to boost American patriotism and morale. In the aftermath of 9/11, there has been a marked increase in militaristic video games that strive to reflect real-world conflict, including the US military's engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan (Šisler, 2014).

The surge of militaristic video games following the 9/11 attacks was considered as a patriotic effort to heal the emotional wounds inflicted on American society by terrorism act. Nonetheless, this patriotic effort also represents a modern form of American propaganda. Video games, with their interactive nature, have become a powerful tool for spreading ideologies, blending

entertainment with political messaging. The narratives cast the protagonist as a brave, heroic American soldier who triumphs over terrorists, exemplifying the jingoism prevalent in these games. Moreover, the widespread availability of these video games in supermarkets and local stores, makes it easy for American society to access and engage with these ideological messages.

Although the content of militaristic video games is frequently inspired by real events, many of the scenarios depicted are fictional. Therefore, these fabricated situations can lead to two significant outcomes that may influence the player's political perspective: 1) They may reinforce the notion that force is the only viable solution to political conflicts in regions such as Iraq and Afghanistan, suggesting that combating terrorism can only be achieved through violence rather than diplomacy; 2) By placing players in the role of the protagonist, these games allow violence to occur outside the bounds of formal military regulations. While these points are contentious, the broader procedural rhetoric in militarised video games can shape alternative versions of reality and history, contributing to the support of military agendas (Robinson, 2012).

Conflict: Desert Storm II – Back to Baghdad

In 2003, Gotham Games released another instalment in the *Conflict* franchise, titled *Conflict: Desert Storm II: Back to Baghdad*. The game provided a brief yet fitting representation of the Iraq War. Halter (2006)

notes that the product packaging of *Conflict: Desert Storm II: Back to Baghdad* includes a short paragraph that reflects the jingoism often associated with typical Hollywood war films. The paragraph stated:

From the smoke and fire of the Gulf War, four heroes returned to finish the job they started. Your elite operatives will be sent into the most intense combat yet, as they take on **the Iraqi regime's chemical arms, secret weapons and hidden arsenals, which continue to threaten the gulf**. Lock and load and get ready to GO LOUD!

The brief narrative above illustrates how video game developers can act as propagandists, subtly influencing their audience's opinions. Through the portrayal of "*the Iraqi regime's chemical arms, secret weapons, and hidden arsenals that continue to threaten the Gulf*," Iraq is depicted as a dangerous nation to be avoided. This narrative employs bandwagon and card-stacking propaganda techniques. By focusing on Iraq's alleged chemical weapons, it encourages players to question whether the country truly possesses such weapons of mass destruction or other weapons. This issue was specifically relevant in the early 2000s, as discussions about Iraq's chemical and nuclear capabilities gained prominence in Western media. Moreover, the depiction of Iraq's military secrets risks stigmatising the entire Middle East, or even the Muslim community, as a hotbed of danger and terrorism.

Vít Šisler (2014) discusses this issue in his analysis of the Western view of Muslim identity, noting that stereotypes of terrorism have been amplified in the video game industry, specifically after the 9/11 attacks. He argues that since then, Muslim identity has been increasingly politicised, with a growing association between Islam, Arab identity, and terrorism (Šisler, 2014). Such portrayals reinforce a neo-Orientalist framework that views Muslim and Arab identities as potential sources of violence and insecurity, while positioning Western military forces as agents of order, civilisation, and security. Thus, complex political realities are reduced to a simplified binary opposition between freedom and terror, civilisation and barbarism, or order and chaos. Through these representations, *Conflict: Desert Storm II* reproduces the post-9/11 narrative that portrays the Middle East primarily as a site of conflict and threat.

Kuma/War

The militaristic video game *Kuma/War* (2004) stands out as one of the most overtly propagandistic video games, released at a time when the US invasion of the Middle East was escalating. Developed by the Kuma Reality Games in New York City, the game was created by a team of retired US military officers. *Kuma/War* offers a free-to-play experience where players are tasked with eliminating enemies hiding in buildings, including sacred sites such as mosques in Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, the game portrays Sunni and Shia Muslim communities as predominantly terrorist

groups, framing them within narratives of insurgency, international terrorism, and religious fundamentalism (Šisler, 2008).

Kuma/War was designed not only as a militaristic video game but also as an interactive chronicle of the Global War on Terror. The game incorporates original news coverage, battlefield footage, and information drawn from major media outlets such as Fox News, BBC, and CNN, as well as military reports, DoD records, and independent research. Featuring up to 15 missions, *Kuma/War* provides players with contextual materials, including event narratives, satellite imagery, news reports, and interviews with experts and developers, to enhance the authenticity of its representation of real-world conflicts

This video game stands out for its unique narrative style, which seeks to replicate television news coverage, aiming to create a sense of realism. The narration is paired with actual footage taken directly from US military personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition to this immersive storytelling approach, the game emphasises realism through highly detailed weapon models, realistic gunfire sounds, and combat scenarios. However, this “realistic” portrayal does not extend to the game’s depiction of its enemies, represented by Iraq. The antagonists are depicted as a homogenous group with characteristics resembling Muslims, such as dark skin, traditional clothing, and turbans. This visual portrayal is further reinforced by a narrative that connects these images to themes of international terrorism and Islamic extremism.

The gameplay and visuals in *Kuma/War* are considered a form of propaganda. Several missions within the game feature intense narratives that recount the American invasion of Iraq, include footage from the war, and even depict figures like Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein in a manner that suggests a connection between them, specifically during the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Additionally, Muslims are portrayed as the “enemy”. This portrayal can be interpreted as employing three key propaganda techniques: name-calling, card-stacking, and bandwagon.

In terms of name-calling techniques, the game employs labelling that aligns with Western stereotypes, specifically when portraying Arabs and other Middle Eastern groups or individuals. For instance, cities like Fallujah in Iraq are portrayed not as civilian areas but as spaces exclusively associated with terrorists, often shown taking refuge in a mosque. This portrayal employs not only name-calling but also card-stacking, as it selectively presents information that distorts the truth. Many missions in the game focus on Saddam Hussein, his sons Uday and Qusay, and the rebel forces in Mosul and Fallujah. However, two missions, ‘*Operation Anaconda*’ and ‘*Mosul: The al-Qaeda Connection*,’ abruptly shift focus to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. This shift suggests that Kuma Reality Games is attempting to weave a narrative connecting Iraq to al-Qaeda, possibly influencing players to believe in a stronger link between the two. By constructing this narrative, the game also employs a bandwagon technique,

subtly shaping players’ opinions to accept the game’s representation of the Iraq War as a widely accepted view. In addition to the use of propaganda techniques, this portrayal can also be interpreted through the lens of neo-Orientalism. The game consistently frames Muslim and Middle Eastern characters through associations with terrorism, violence, and insecurity, thereby reinforcing post-9/11 narratives that construct Islam and the Arab world as potential threats to Western civilisation. Through this framing, *Kuma/War* reproduces a neo-Orientalist dichotomy between a civilised Western military force and a dangerous Middle Eastern “Other”.

America’s Army

America’s Army was developed as a military recruitment tool designed to encourage Americans to join the US Army. Conceived in 1999 by Colonel Casey Wardynski, the game sought to provide an engaging virtual battlefield experience while utilising the growing video game market to reach potential recruits. Wardynski viewed young Americans, particularly those attracted to action-oriented video games, as a key audience for military recruitment efforts (Hames, 2009).

Upon its release, *America’s Army* was not only used as a recruitment tool but also as a government training resource. By 2013, the game had evolved into a key component for various military training and simulation applications, including the development of PackBot robots and surveillance vehicles for nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons

detection. During its peak, *America's Army* garnered widespread media attention, becoming the focal point of thousands of television news stories, online articles, radio segments, and major print publications across the United States. Its popularity led to a cover feature in *AdWeek* magazine, and, in 2009, the game earned two Guinness World Records titles: Most Downloaded War Game and Largest Virtual Army (Mead, 2013).

America's Army considered as a significant symbol of the expansive military-entertainment complex, with its influence reinforcing the militarisation of society and legitimising the dominant ideology. Beyond its aim of providing military insight to the American public, the game also serves as a recruitment tool for the US Army. Wardynski further argued that the game's primary objective was to harness entertainment technology to educate both potential recruits and the broader public about the US military. This is evident in the game's integration of military values and elements related to the quality of life, as intended by its developers (Hames, 2009).

The development of *America's Army* stands as a notable example of how the US military has used video games as a form of propaganda in the post-9/11 era. In the wake of the tragedy, the prevalence of militaristic video games steadily grew, peaking in 2004, and turning them into a mainstream genre among players. According to IGN (2004), that year was dubbed the “year of war,” with military-themed video game sales reaching unprecedented levels. This surge reflects the significant influence of propaganda

within the American video game industry. Some developers argued that interactive media could serve as an effective tool for educating the public about terrorism and the complexities of conflicts in the Middle East.

In this context, the surge of post-9/11 patriotism made audiences more receptive to representations of terrorism and related cultural stereotypes. The game's portrayal of American military heroism and its foreign enemies reflect a broader post-9/11 neo-Orientalist narrative that positions the United States as the defender of freedom and security, while depicting Muslim and Middle Eastern identities as sources of potential threat and instability. Such representations reinforce the binary opposition between the civilised and virtuous West and the dangerous “Other” of the Middle East. Through player participation, these narratives are not merely observed but actively experienced, thereby allowing ideological messages to be internalised through interactive gameplay.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the development of interactive propaganda through video games, exploring their potential use in targeting the general public with propaganda following the 9/11 attacks. In the aftermath, Americans experienced widespread uncertainty and trauma. In response, the US government launched the Global War on Terror Military Campaign, aiming to defeat terrorist organisations while instilling a sense of patriotism among its people. Video game producers saw this as

an opportunity to create militaristic games featuring subliminal political messages that aligned with the government's new initiatives, both at home and abroad. Video games with military themes, such as *Conflict: Desert Storm II: Back to Baghdad*, *Kuma/War*, and *America's Army*, received support from the US government. Nevertheless, further analysis reveals that these games employ jingoistic rhetoric and propaganda techniques, including card-stacking, bandwagoning, and name-calling. The findings also suggest that these games reproduce post-9/11 neo-Orientalist narratives by framing Muslim and Middle Eastern identities through recurring associations with terrorism, insecurity, and conflict. Such representations reinforce a binary distinction between a civilised Western self and a threatening cultural “Other,” reflecting broader political and cultural discourses that emerged after the 9/11 attacks. The study shows how video games can serve as powerful tools for shaping public opinion and promoting political agendas.

IMPLICATION

This study explores how interactive propaganda and militaristic video games have evolved, focusing on their role in shaping perceptions of conflict. Current events, such as the Ukraine-Russia and Israel-Palestine conflicts, influence the creation of militaristic video games, both now and in the future. These real-world situations often inspire video games that adapt these events into virtual experiences.

By examining this relationship, the study deepens our understanding of how media, culture, and politics intersect, especially in the context of warfare. It shows how video games can shape narratives and influence perceptions, specifically among young audiences.

LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. The three militaristic video games analysed were released in the early 2000s and are not fully compatible with modern devices. Additionally, while many militaristic video games have been released since 9/11, only three were selected for this study. Future research could explore the number of militaristic video games that were canceled due to strong public opposition, specifically from the Muslim community, in the US or other Western countries. Researchers might also examine the ongoing collaboration between the US government, military, and the American video game industry as militaristic video games continue to be produced. For example, *Call of Duty: Black Ops 6* (2024), set during the Gulf War, was released amid rising tensions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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